

—REINS IN THE NIGHT SEASON

DEATH OF A PISTOLERO

by Lorne Dixon

(one)

The tattoo above the three bullet wounds read *Preserve Me, O God, For In Thee Do I Put My Trust*. The old pistolero screeched as Phelps dug the third ball out of his chest. Phelps was no doctor, but he had fought in the war with Mexico and had stitched up his share of wounds, both on his own body and elsewhere.

I watched Phelps nurse him for three days, watched the scarred old man fade away. His skin turned yellow like the cheap paper they used to print *wanted* posters, and his lips blushed purple. When the Mexican's breathing became nothing more than an uneven symphony of gasps and shudders, I knew that the bank guard's wild shots had done more than put holes in the flesh. Those three shots would finally kill the old bastard.

"Bury me with Julieta's muñeca."

His daughter's doll. The only toy he had ever bought her. Dionisio had missed out on most of his child's life, but cherished the few memories he could. Phelps and I knew the story well.

Phelps left the rented room to go breathe a little air not polluted by the blood and bile on the old man's breath. Dionisio moaned. His hands twitched. He reminded me of my father at his end, clutching his leather-bound bible but crying because he didn't believe in any of it anymore.

He was in pain. I was impatient. After he told me his final wish, I smothered him with an old shirt that reeked of sweat, beer, and gunpowder. He didn't fight. I think he wanted to die worse than I wanted to kill him. And I won't lie; I hated the filthy son of a bitch. It was a pleasure to feel his nose crack under my thumb.

Psalm Sixteen stopped moving as he stopped breathing.

My mistake was passing his last words along to Phelps, who seemed more interested in the wish than his share of the bankroll we could now split just two ways. I did understand his compassion, but I understood sixty grand better.

Dionisio was dead, not us. We had lives to buy. I suggested we bury him out in the Texas desert and head north. North looked good. It was 1859 and the country was holding itself together with bad faith, straight liquor, and stupid pride. Maybe New York or Boston, somewhere we could stop looking over our shoulders for state lawmen and bounty hunters. I told Phelps we should move on immediately.

"We can't."

REINS IN THE NIGHT SEASON

“We *can*,” I assured him, drumming my fingers on a stack of bills.

Phelps began packing his satchel. “My grandmamma told me when I was just a pup, a dyin’ man’s last wish is a duty call. You ignore it, then your own last wish will turn into something wicked. A curse on your family.”

“I ain’t got no *family*,” I lied. My mother was still alive, last I knew. Alive and drunk on homemade gin, probably.

Phelps tossed his spare revolver into the bag. “The rash on my ass, I ain’t got no care about your family. But I got three daughters back in Murfreesboro, and I *won’t* have their old man bring down any hurt or worries on their lives.”

Thing was, Phelps was just as tough a bastard as the Mexican, and better with a sidearm. The intensity of his powder blue eyes held all the menace—and convincing—I needed. I would do whatever he demanded. But I did have enough hair between my tits to at least voice my disapproval.

“Well, we *can’t* do it anyway. If Julieta’s momma even kept the damn doll, it’s down in Mexico. We’d have to go down there and get it. They’ll shoot us on sight on that side of the border. Then carve up our faces so our kin can’t recognize us.”

It wasn’t an arrest warrant, really. A livestock auction heist in Mérida got ugly and a swarm of *policía* rode in. Very few rode out. Families grieved. Gravediggers ate well. We bought more ammunition in the next town. The three of us were forever scorched into the memory of Mexican lawmen. If they ever caught us, we would never see the inside of a proper jail cell. Policemen in Mexico carried blades and were trained to use them. Dionisio knew this. A police captain found his wife and daughter and demanded they tell him where Dionisio hid. His wife refused. The cop severed her fingers one by one, leaving her with only thumbs. Then he slit young Julieta’s throat and calmly left her to bleed to death, her mother unable to hold the wound closed with her destroyed hands.

I tried to hold my own when he stared me down. I lost. Still protesting, I packed my own saddlebag. We were both used to traveling light. Phelps was born in the basement of the bakery where his father worked. At four, his father’s heart gave out. Soon afterwards, the building owner stopped accepting sex as rent and tossed his mother out. Back then he didn’t even own anything to pack.

(two)

We left Dionisio and his horse at the cabin and rode southeast. Our own horses were old and weighed down by too many nights in the rain and a few scarred-over bullet holes. But they had enough motion left in their legs to carry us across the border. Phelps actually seemed to enjoy the journey, sitting straight in his saddle, taking an occasional sip of wine from his canteen. “I’ve seen those drawings they use. They don’t look *nothing* like us. We’re gonna *dance* right through.”

Texas ended and Mexico started and there wasn’t even a wooden sign leaning in the sand to mark the change. Honestly, there wasn’t much difference anyway. The color of the sand didn’t change. No police waited with revolvers drawn. We drank. Heavily. We slept strapped onto our horses to keep the scorpions from nesting in our clothes. The stars faded as the sky turned blue and we continued to ride until they returned. Days passed. We nearly ran out of alcohol.

I unwrapped a small satchel of peyote root on the third night and dug it in under